



IRON-CLAD STRANGENESS

What do bubbling mud, silvery goddesses, Busby Berkeley musical numbers and bulbous-headed aliens have in common? They inhabit the crossed-neuron memory banks of filmmaker Steve Daughton and materialize in his humorously oddball pastiche *FERRUM 5000*.

Steve Daughton is by nature an introvert. Born and raised in the Portland, Oregon, rain belt, the 33-year-old filmmaker spent his youth quietly drawing, painting and building models—specifically the Aurora monster kits and various weirdo hot rods.

"There's a Robert Williams painting of a kid building a Luft-waffa airplane with two tubes of Testor's glue shoved up his nose—yeah, that was kind of me," Daughton reminisces, his memory still sharp despite all those hours of exposure to the head-tripping vapors of polystyrene-melting adhesives. But if one were looking for some obvious explanation to his film *Ferrum 5000*, perhaps the most passively psychoactive short since Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America*, the stern words of warning "Use only in a well-

ventilated area" might serve as some cryptic clue.

A variation on the periodic table term for the mineral iron, ferrum permeates this investigation into

organic rituals and deeply hued dancing girls, as *Ferrum 5000* begins like some autistic PBS National Parks special—with lingering shots of pulsating mud pots and

steaming sulphur pools forming the vision of an evolving new volcanic world. Behind the scenes, a klatch of heavily lobed superior beings inject their will, in the form of a gleaming nine-point atomic structure, into the boiling mix. It transforms to be personified by a metallic goddess rising from a central pool, born amongst a bevy of silver-sheathed admirers. They dance in art deco celebration to the reedy strains of a pumping Glenn Miller-like score, replicating the patterns of molecular structures as the aliens watch in amazement.

From their expressions, they didn't seem as shocked

LAURE A. LEBER



Karen Black vocalist Kembra Pfahler is the silvery Goddess.

BY DAVID E. WILLIAMS

as I was by this all—nor were they laughing. But I was, as *Ferrum 5000* is probably the most seductively pleasant dive into deep weirdosity I've yet encountered. And though I can imagine his neighbors and friends describing Daughton as "quiet and polite," as they might a methodical psychopath, his brain is benevolently aflame with a mélange of images culled from years of pop culture gluttony. And in *Ferrum 5000* they find their bulimic escape.

"It sounds corny, but the film is really a collection of images that, for one reason or another, have struck me all my life. Some of my earlier memories are episodes of *Star Trek*, seeing musicals on TV when I was a kid, seeing a Disney special about and then visiting Yellowstone Park—so *Ferrum 5000* is really a collection of samples of my memory. The aliens, they're right out of the *Star Trek* episode 'The Cage,' which is a very early memory for me. When I was six years old and I saw those butt-headed aliens with the pulsating veins—I did *not* understand it. That burned into my brain and really altered how I saw things. When I was five I remember watching an early Bugs Bunny cartoon and thinking, *Hey, are these people in costumes?* My head just couldn't accept it—and it was another five years before anyone explained to me how animation was done."

But for all this love of past imagery, *Ferrum 5000* is completely original, using not a foot of archival or "found" footage. "The

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**—STEVE DAUGHTON
ON MAKING
FERRUM 5000**

Goddess rising from the pool is a lift from *Apocalypse Now* and her being metallic, that's *Goldfinger*. But we recreated and reconfigured it into my own thing, a personal myth," explains Daughton. "I don't like talking about it in these terms—it sounds pretentious—but the film is about the ritual of making a pilgrimage to a natural deity, like Old Faithful, and representing nature as a form of entertainment. Yellowstone was the first National Park, a place where we go to visit. So the film works that way too. It's about cycles and structures found in nature and how they relate."

But does Daughton care if his audience gets the film at this sub-atomic level?

"No. Actually it's pretty boring to even talk about it this way,"

Daughton candidly admits. "It's a lot more fun just to watch it. To be honest, that's just where it came from, but this is not a heavy film—I'm not like that. It's an art film that entertains, but there's also nothing there that's truly gratuitous. The pop imagery is like a modern mythology. There's an elf in there to represent the sort of traditional European druid culture...it all does mean something, but to talk about it sounds shallow. I'm not sure what Kubrick was getting at in *2001*, but he was getting at something, something you can only *get at* in a movie, and that is the sort of experience I'm trying for."

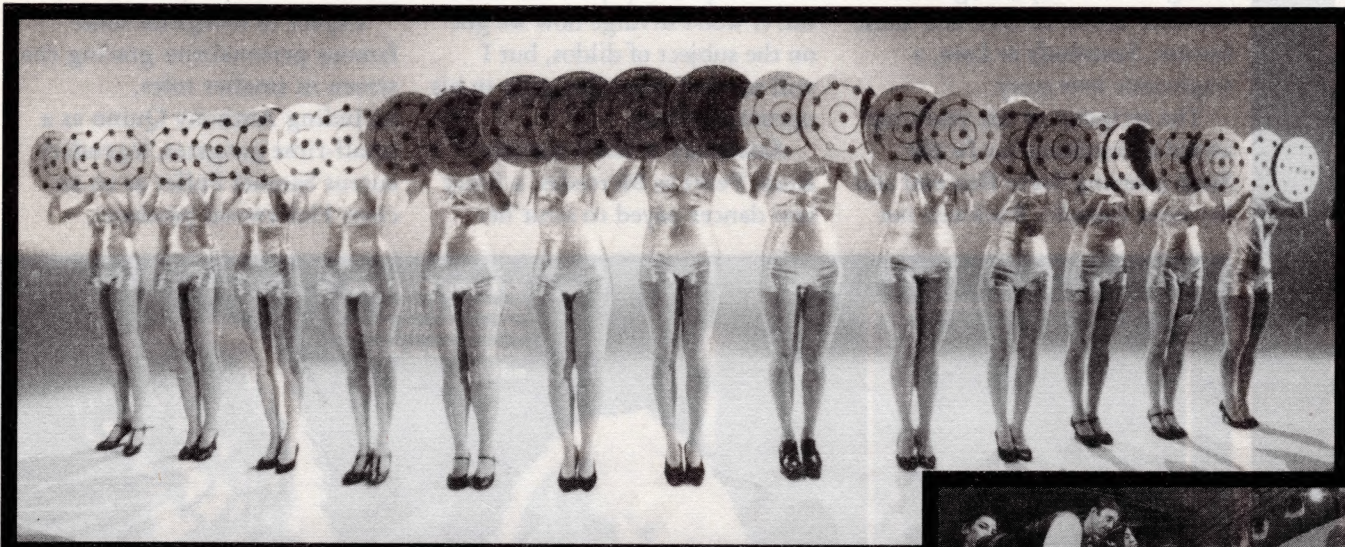
This great *Ferrum 5000* purge was set in motion when Daughton's parents gave their son a Super 8 movie camera at the age of eight—leading him to pursue his artistic tendencies. "We won't go into all the shit they pulled on me," Steve jokes, "but they thought of me as a troubled kid and that anything I did that wasn't destructive should be encouraged." But it was during a road trip through the Arizona desert that Daughton's vision crystallized. "I was driving along and the idea for the whole piece came to me in the span of about five minutes. All these images just clicked at once. I had no idea how I was going to do it, but I started drawing really elaborate storyboards, thinking if they looked serious enough, somebody

was going to take my ideas seriously. And it worked."

A series of key pieces of the *Ferrum* puzzle, including



The butt-headed aliens inspired by "The Cage" (Rick Hall, Jane Kirby and David Wilentz).



Top row, left to right: Dancer Jeanine Herman in the height of FERRUM fashion, dancer Christina Fortenbaugh plays with atomic structures, dancer Andrea Lerner gazes in amazement. Above: The dancing girls of FERRUM 5000, decked out Busby Berkeley-style. Right: Choreographer Holly Adams directs her catty dancers as director/cameraman Daughton and assistant Derek Wieseahn prepare to shoot.



producer Jody Solomon, the casting of Kembra Pfahler as the Goddess and the addition of choreographer Holly Adams, fell into place over time as Daughton continued to sort through and collect his images. "By the time I approached Jody, I had the complete boards, some footage and Holly, who knew how to do this Busby Berkeley stuff, but that was where the hard part began," he says.

Getting the production organized, with elaborate costumes, makeup and choreography, became a logistical nightmare as rental studios cancelled shoots at the last minute. "It was probably a blessing in disguise. We came up with a better lighting scheme than I had and it gave us more time to come up with the dancing sequences—you can never be prepared enough for that stuff.

"Holly really knew what she was doing. She got together a lot of dancers—some strippers, a lot of them were strippers—and there was competition between them as to who was the best and who would get more camera time. Some of them were pretty catty. When Kembra arrived in the middle of the day, her hair was like a total rat's nest and the other dancers were saying, 'That's the Goddess?!' Two hours later she came out of makeup and she was radiant—things changed. So it was difficult at times, but I picked up on it and we all finally got along."

So when did Daughton realize filmmaking could become a full-time venture he could possibly make some money doing?

"I didn't," he laughs. "But I realized while we were working on *Ferrum 5000* that I have no problem obtaining a certain look I want. While we were shooting I looked around, saw that we had all this equipment, knew how to use it and realized that, yeah, I'm actually *skilled* at this stuff. Of course you can't do everything yourself on a film—you have to depend on and trust other people to do certain things for you. But when they start going in directions you might never have thought of, *that's* when it really gets *interesting*."

Currently completing *Ferrum 5000*, Daughton can be contacted by equally affected parties at 51 McDougal St., New York, NY 10012 or (212) 222-5579. 🎬